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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

BOOK OF DEFINITION

by



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A THESIS

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Abstract

This is a series of poems based upon my grandfather's diaries. It is divided into three sections, the first of which deals with his life in Russia and his early trips to North America, the second with his life in Canada, the third with my own memories of him. I am concerned in these poems with history, things which really did happen.

Book of Definition

"The Heart is a clock"

Charles Olson

Foreword

My grandfather, Samuel Karst, was born on the 12th of May, 1874 at Holstein, a German settlement on the Volga River. German colonization along the Volga and in the Black Sea region had been encouraged by a series of Russian Czars and their ministers, notably the Duc Armand de Richelieu, who had been appointed governor of Odessa in 1805. In response to offers of free land, exemptions from taxation and military service, interest-free loans and religious freedom, a steady stream of German settlers moved down the Volga to Saratov or overland from Vienna to Odessa. By the mid-nineteenth century German colonies were thriving throughout southwest Russia.

The Karst family joined this stream of settlers in 1873. It took them one hundred and eight days to complete the trip from Pirmasens in the Rhine Palatinate to Holstein, a small village near Saratov. It was a poorly timed move. The expansion of German colonies had become a sore point in panslavic circles whose efforts brought about the abrogation of the Codex of the Colonists in 1871. The rights of the immigrants were revoked, they were placed under the administration of the Ministry of the Interior, the colonies went into a lengthy decline. The settlers began another migration, either into remote sections of Siberia where the new laws were not strictly enforced, or to the Americas. When the Karsts arrived many of the Germans had already left.

Samuel Karst began writing a memoir in 1929. Except for a few

extremely vivid incidents the memoir records only the vaguest generalizations about his early childhood. When he was nineteen, however, he was refused entry to a denominational college because he had an unfulfilled commitment to the Russian Army. For some reason the incident seems to jog his memory. He immediately begins to make lists: classmates, girlfriends, teachers, churches, customs, even dress styles.

From 1895 to 1899 Samuel served in the Army, where he was trained as a blacksmith and lockbuilder. Soon after his discharge he married Katharina Yauk. Within the next five years they had purchased a farm, established a blacksmith's shop and had three children. 1904, however, brought the Russo-Japanese War, and it was decided that Samuel, rather than return to the Army, would go to Canada. He arrived in Winnipeg on January 8th, 1905, and after working at several jobs went south to North Dakota, then Kansas, staying with relatives all the while. He returned in October, 1906, well after peace terms had been agreed upon.

In 1911 there was again a threat of war, this time with Turkey, and Samuel Karst again fled to America. Plagued by infected eyes, depleting funds and bureaucratic snarl, the second trip was difficult. When he returned six months later he brought with him six hundred dollars and the conviction that the entire family must move to North America. They needed little convincing.

Arriving at Quebec City on the 12th of June, 1912, they were in Winnipeg three days later and in another five weeks were settled in

Cymric, Saskatchewan, which was nothing but a station, a post-office and a Welshman. They stayed at a nearby farm with Chris Yauk, a brother-in-law.

Samuel purchased land the following year and again in 1916. He built a new house and a new barn and again set up a blacksmith's shop. But in 1916 his fourth son, Constantine, died. This awoke in Samuel a religious zeal and he attended campmeetings, became the pastor of two churches, led the choir in each, and built a third. But as his enthusiasm for religion increased, his interest in farming flagged and he was in continual danger of being dispossessed by his creditors. As his sons grew older they gradually took over the farm and made it more profitable but there were a number of difficult years intervening.

Between 1920 and 1940 the memoir is replete with these difficulties. Drought, rust, windstorms, hailstorms, a ridiculously low price for wheat, fire, debt. There were freak accidents. In 1932 David Kelln jumped off a threshing machine onto a fork handle which passed through his rectum and killed him. In 1933 a neighbor had his foot cut off in the same machine and bled to death on the way to the hospital. But the memoir also records the pleasures that attended the family. It was a large family and consequently there was a large number of weddings. And an even larger number of grandchildren. One of the happiest occasions in the memoir is the Christmas of 1943 when the entire family managed to gather at the farm. It was the last time they were all together.

In 1947 Samuel purchased a home in Govan, a neighboring town to

which he retired the following year. He still helped on the farm but more and more his time was spent in his garden or with his books. He was still working on his memoirs but also wrote verse and attempted to translate obscure German mystics. Katharina died in 1958 and this sent Samuel, whose own health had been failing in any case, into a depression from which he never fully recovered. After her death he spent his time visiting his children and his relatives but both his eyesight and his memory were failing. In addition, he lost the ability to speak English, thereby cutting himself off from his grandchildren, few of whom could speak German. He died in 1961, muttering in his sleep.

It is from this last period that I know him. He stayed at our place on several occasions, two and three months at a time. That he was something of a burden to my parents there can be no doubt. He would come on a whim and leave as easily. My father had to drive him wherever he wanted to go. If, for some reason, my father could not drive him then grandfather would start out walking and soon all of us would be out looking for him. He slept in my parents' bed, they slept in mine, and I was relegated to the attic. Sometimes he frightened me. But he also delighted me, giving me dimes from his battered change purse, showing me the gruesome pictures in some of his history books, frightening Willson, my older brother, away when he was trying to keep my small friends and me from climbing in to our treehouse. When he died, my mother was left with his personal belongings, of which his memoir was the most interesting.

I have used that memoir as a basis for these poems. Many of the details I have invented or taken from other sources but each poem is initiated by a incident in the memoir. I do not believe that I have created a consistent character. I would no doubt have gained in intensity by doing so. But that would also have meant that I could not write about some of the things I wanted to include, preamble and residuum, which help to make the story interesting.

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Russia

pre-1912

"There are two things, a country
and a dictionary."

Gertrude Stein

To Start With

we pick our starts
out of forgetfulness

three things
-a boy fell into a well
and his father after him
-a man ground under a
windmill's wheel
-the river flooding

a way to begin

at fifty-five
he can't call what he writes
a diary, things not fixed
in each day's history

all through
he keeps coming back
with details, forgotten earlier
each memory a starting over

this beginning again
the advantage of memoir
cutting into history here

or there

eating off a cellar door,
wrestling, the names,
inconsequential

memories tended

and dis-tended
as if there were some ideal sequence
against which these things
the camels,
Krentze's bin,

are
just enough
for comparison

which is what beginning is

Richelieu

in Vienna

"a coward who backs down"

when they heard Suvarov was laying siege to Ismail

without train or baggage
through Moravia
Silesia
Galicia

to Jassy
where they met Langeron
and sent letters on ahead

Bukowina
Moldavia
then the Dniester
and Potemkin's headquarters at Bender

there "a salon furnished with a divan
of gold beneath magnificent baldachinos
in unimaginable splendor and reclining
on cushions in oriental fashion. In
front of them sat Potemkin, dressed in
full-flowing pelisse similar to our
robes de chambre."

And Ribas, Suvarov,
not Potemkin
leading the attack on Ismail
mainly because Potemkin
did not want to leave
Princess Dolgourki

every morning Suvarov
rolling nude in the grass
to preserve himself from rheumatism

and Richelieu, in the middle of blood,
finding a Turkish girl, a cut on her cheek
from the sword that had gone through her mother
a French medal round her neck
giving her back to a garrison of Turks

that bastion later stormed
 and the only prisoner taken
 is memory, Richelieu marching
 back through Bender, Jassy, to Paris

then Petersburg, the Hermitage
 etat-major russe

Coblenz
 Breisgau
 Valenciennes
 Mauberge
 du Quesnoy

the emigre at the head
 of Austrian columns
 retreating behind the Rhine

in Volhynia
 after Catherine's death, 1796,
 he could not command, the Czar
 enraged because Richelieu
 could not mount a parade
 living on 30 sous a day

so Vienna
 Lvov
 Dresden
 waiting for a passport
 which Napoleon finally released
 after a push from Talleyrand
 and Alexander I

then Odessa, the Turkish village of Hadyi-Bey,
 appointed governor-general
 of New Russia
 establishing settlements
 for Germans in Liebental
 Greeks at Mariupol
 Armenians at Nachitchewan
 Jews at Cherson

returning to France
 after Waterloo
 importing wheat from Odessa
 his "beloved Odessa"
 to offset a crop failure

negotiating at Aix-la-Chapelle

then dying, simply
coming to the end
of lists, in 1822

in Odessa, on the Grand Boulevard,
is a statue of Richelieu
the Frenchman in a Roman toga
and a citizen's wreath on his head
one hand pointing towards
the sea, the straits,
the unnamed seas

"...my Uncle jumped into a well to save his son but both were overcome and choked to death which left Aunt a widow with a family to provide for."

no screaming

gas thick as liquid
at the bottom
as if he fell
into clear water

floating on his belly

wind
hauling voices
over the land
into nothing
a hat on edge like a wheel

no one chasing

never a well
no function that would satisfy
any definition

just a hole
dug and forgotten about
rotten boards over it
he ran across
and went through

and the women
came out of the kitchen screaming
but the wind was in their faces
we could see them running
but not hear them

and Uncle said
"hurry up before they get here"
looping the rope around his leg
red scarf over his face

the others bunch over his weight
knotted in the closing air
and could not pull him up fast enough, gas
blooming through his lungs
cloth sucked
into his mouth

that afternoon
I found the hat
caught on chickenwire

there are mountains
in the distance

I remember distinctly
the air above the fields
thick with waves

"Another incident I recall while at Kana, one morning as Mother and we little folk were around our breakfast table, when looking out the window we saw a large camel running towards our window and two riders chasing it."

starting as strangers

(the family German out
of the Palatinate, Pirmasens,
all of their lives moving
towards space)

from where we usually expect roots

the family drags no heritage
behind, nothing that fixes it
into location, no Heimat
ohne Ferne

there is always distance
the small faces fall away
from the window
with eyes too wide for fear
to write any names in
and be understood

too new themselves
to call this strange

camels loping down
the street two
riders chasing

strangers in their own memory
the kids always
in a new land

"In the fall of 1895, the 15th of October, I had to report as a recruit."

for training

practice of
finding value

or putting
in succession

"We were all thoroughly examined to see where we would be useful and placed."

the part of space
occupied

or step in progression
style unwound
as arrangement of things

to fully identify
that is, as divine

"These three years and eight months were the longest of my life."

longest as yearning
or in hand

ordinary writing
remote effects
of being this order

"We were asked as to our abilities and trade, they were indeed varied. I went into blacksmithing and lock building, which brought me good returns."

angle of receding
what's built
is architectural

to learn metals
air
lock as in winter

it is a long time
for coming
back

"I saw for the first time in my life a cannon which we had to learn

to operate; saw officers for the first time. The cannon consisted of 105 pieces."

and the officer
of seventy-four

braids, plumes, spick
brass you say sir

distinct portions
of composition

the shape time
is put together

or as meal
cannon-fodder

"In the 25th of August, 1899, my Army days were ended"

object for which a thing
exists god

as synchrony
the uniform

soldiers bring home
for connection
to make ends meet

yet the returns
come back

without closure
not being able to say

this end
up

Cooling Honey

"It was harvest moon, when farmers were really busy. Not only with grain but also cooling honey from watermelon. My future in-laws had only one daughter old enough to work then so she was at the job. After conversing with her mother the day before I got up the courage to go call on her daughter."

Katie to cool honey from the melons
 frost on the grass, my feet
 wet with it, tracks across the yard
 to mark departures

and Katie, already started,
 scraping pulp onto the table
 the juice silver, beaded round her arm

taut air in my throat

that cold

I wanted to follow my uncle to America
 or to follow the Benders, whose daughter
 played in the street with us
 learning how to swear in Russian

but Katie's mother said
 there were stronger girls here
 than in America

when she heard
 about my plans

now that
 was a hint

I do not want to be called awkward
 so this morning...

yet I move the knife too quickly
 not always a neat cut

melon pulp catches in her hair
 as we mash the fruit through a screen
 and talk

someone else's talking

what her mom said
 to me
 to her

 I don't know
 like the melon in her hair, moving
 in the wind

and I kissed her

"I questioned her whether there was one
 among the returned soldiers that would
 qualify for her choice of a life's com-
 panion. She would not admit so I began
 naming down the list. She refused all
 of them except my name. So from then on
 love became active in embracing and
 kisses."

 was the list complete?
 adequate?

or after the fact
 does it matter?
 bringing honey from the fruit
 scraping the rinds clean

 the sun wipes
 frost from the grass
 and our tracks disappear

there are enough melons to keep
 us busy all week
 there are some we taste
 but most we leave
 it is a sweetness in the mouth

"In 1900 Katrina's dad passed away. I was asked to make the handles for his coffin, which I really did so gladly. Because of the funeral our marriage had to be delayed again."

She asked me
to put the handles on.
I'll carve them I said
but no, very plain.
It is for nothing I said
and she said yes
it is for nothing
and I was embarrassed.

My wrist still not,
on the floor curls
of pale wood, wormed
out by the screws.
They bulge the inside panels
with their tips,
this wooden empty box.

She said you must not
see Katrina until
the mourning ends.
The handles will be smooth
for the palm's ease;
even dead, a weight
to contend with.

Never at ease with him;
circling around that topic-
Katrina-
thinking of the wrestling
at Easter, how he was good there,
bending into the circle

later walked with a stoop
we said came from wrestling
too much, not age

and now the mother
holding me at arm's length.

I don't like corners empty.
Perhaps that brings
this self-consciousness, my face
red as my hand is.

The screws bore a hole
in the wood's fibre
and fill it; security.
I know what I'm doing,
each screw for me, not him,
pushing him into history,

this tired hand.

She said to wait
is only decent. Well,
I wouldn't like my coffin
dropped in the middle of an aisle.
These handles will hold;
a way of getting a grip
on the world.

"Once more I had to get two men to ask for the bride's hand."

the custom of spokesmen
 someone else to represent your case

because someone else
 can talk about you better
 than you can yourself

and these two
 I want to repeat
 what I told them exactly

history, not,
 the essence of which is,
 poetry

so I wait quietly in the bedroom,
 yellow blinds rolled half up, dust
 collecting on the baseboards

a figure of my own quotation

then
 I think of this formality
 without rancor

half-smiling spokesmen
 without my confidence
 as if there were
 insufficiencies I hadn't
 told them about

but I already know the answer
 and sit
 for three-quarters of a hour
 making what they say
 alive in my head

and hearing it
 from my own mouth
 gets me up dancing
 through the dust

"In 1902 we began building our own property."

In the austere granary
 we use for living
 the agents unroll their persuasions
 folders, brochures,
 posters spread on the floor
 with a shoe on each corner
 to hold them down
 they wear long coats
 heavy with melting snow
 and foreign money

I am not convinced

after working two years
 unloading lumber from the boats
 that are dragged, 60 feet wide,
 downstream to be dismantled
 at Astrakhan
 torn into lumber themselves

beginning our own property
 and measuring it against everyone
 else's outbuildings

our first home
 on the Blatt-Kopf's property
 then in Gustav's bakehouse

our eldest son arrived here
 and in 1901
 Katie delirious for three days
 with our second

the Peils, whose bin
 we lived in
 moving her into the house
 til she recovered and we moved

flotsam
 in the slow Volga current

and now the river visits us with memory
 flowing at our property's edge

the kids can't go near
 except for Alex
 who helps load wheat
 from the granaries to the barges

and now the kids stand
 where winter unrolls down mainstreet
 with the consistency of our lives
 looking at the funny penny
 the agents gave them

one hundred and sixty acres
 of country without history

but that is a common offering
 "All the lands of the colonists
 are given to them for eternal
 time as an inalienable and
 hereditary possession."

Catharine II

and this family's past
 strung like beads
 along this string of water
 towns slung down the banks
 towards the piers
 or cresting the hill
 staring out at the steppe

I show the agents
 where our house will be built
 they shake their heads,
 fold the brochures, roll
 the posters up

from the upstairs window
 we'll be able to see
 the muddy water flowing by

when the house is done

"Yet I had the choice to make, go to war, or go to America."

April
and the machinery
repaired quickly this year;
 it will not hold forever.
It's not that I'm careless
 but afraid. War with Turkey:
 I plan for America.

And through my fear the welds will crack.
There were no lies told,
the flaws, work too quickly done
pointed to, explained.
 America for this make-do drawbar.
 I don't think they believed me.

Other bonds:
I know who cried,
who walked behind the wagon,
who beside, old men nodding their heads.
 Wife and kids.

When I move it is into memory,
 the knowledge of joints
 pulling apart when the dirt
 pulls one way and the ox another.

They'll remember me,
 that clumsy walk behind a plow
 to keep their anger down.

Photos

"I left Sterling, Colorado, went back to Kansas. My wife took the children to Kamishin to have pictures taken. I had asked her to have them taken and arrange them so that I can find a place on the photo too. She sent them to me and I had them done with myself also sitting with them."

She took the children to Kamishin
to have pictures made. I sent
the money home. This family
arrangement, the separation.

The children sprawl out of her lap
in sailor suits and lace dresses.
There is a light space for me
to be placed in. The photographer's brushes

to touch me in; there is one
in Fort Collins. A picture
to bring us together. It will
surprise her mother, our

friends, the cousins I work for.
They'll say it's an old one
but I'll date it in town.
They know I haven't been home

and I haven't. Sometimes my body
fits into spaces not made for it.
I won't pretend. She leans
backward against the weight

of the smallest daughter;
it will seem she leans on me
if the man can do it.
He should place me

standing sideways. My shoulders
may be too big. I'll
let him decide. A dozen
if I like them, paying well.

We can say we're together
or have been recently.
It will be some consolation
for these blank spaces.

The Bridge

"I viewed the huge iron bridge, 'The Brooklyn', supposed to be one of the largest in the world then."

the bridge weaves
around stars
and he stands
under the girdered sky
with the smell
of damp wool, the tickle
of grain dust
the discomfort
of his thick coat
and memory

waiting for a boat home
to wife, children, the coarse
weave of relations

and he thinks about the Kansas wind
slipping soft cotton
around those girls' thighs
how his hands were too rough
to move smoothly on it

and he has the cloth she wanted
a bolt of striped cotton
for his wife to sew

his memories round their bodies

the way the cables dangle
around air

"We found to be separated from each other held temptations for both of us. There were always those who gossip and start rumors to cause problems between a couple."

the current talk
avoids me
knowing I'm
its center
not noticing
I'm in the room
they remark
how my absence
is filled

her letters
in my pocket
a charm
against words
spoken
at suppertables
bland food
teasing tongues
to indiscretion

I live from
rumor to rumor
the way my neighbors
live hand
to mouth

Continental Drift

"I woke up in fright, took pen and paper and wrote the dream to my wife right away."

I dreamt one night
of countries moving

it was a theory I'd heard

no bridges, boats
channels, just

the drift of rock
across softer rock

incontinent
my hand on your thigh

Border Control

"The Russian always has been and still is, and always will be stupid."

lines on maps, borders,
the mind's truncations

at Eudkuhnen

(Anna Grigorevna
called it, correctly,
Eydtkuhnen. She was
impressed by the "enormous
restaurants with two rows
of windows one above the
other, and a marvellous
painted ceiling and every-
thing wonderfully done."
But she was going
the other way.)

the control
threw his suitcase open
and wanted forty rubles
to let the silk underwear,
another gift for his wife,
through

hanging it from their fingers
draping it against the twill
of their uniforms

he left it
and all the way home dreamt
about undressing the guards'
wives

his body coming home
like contraband

Getting Home December 9

"When we arrived at my house I asked my driver to go knock and ask if we can stay here for the night. It was dark and my wife spoke through the window saying our father is not home so we do not take anyone in."

the moon picks its gardens
to play in night hardens
the carts' ruts a ragged white

her body a knotting of frost
untied by beams tossed
eloquent on the cold steppe

back arched under air's weight
imagination's plait
of body on body

the driver's frost-tipped robe
on the seat, at the window
the driver

and she doesn't open
it is the admission
of what's imagined

as what's imagined
infidelities of what's been
to what is or is not

I sent the driver away
pulled her through space flayed
with longing

where frost and moon pale faces
with their distance

kissing those lips

Exchange

"All went well, except I had some difficulty cashing three one hundred dollar bills I had brought from New York."

floating between abstract
and concrete
these dollars deal
in each, real
enough for fat men
to love, uncertain
of where they meet gold

only one banker in Saratow
took that chance
 gambling against models
 he wasn't sure of
 an act of the imagination

these indecipherable bills
for a handful of familiar rubles
the merchants will accept
 a rate of exchange for purchase
 on this country
 feeding my kids on metaphor

and yet in my small town
the lenders, who probably have their own version
of the streets in the new world
refused me, rubbing the bills
between their fingers
as if they were really

money.

Packing

"In 1912 we prepared to move to America for good to make our home there."

unable to decide
which color goes best
with departure
the shirts sit on the valise
like propriety, decorum, good
taste

 none of which are
habitual the way
this moving is

Katie chooses for me
and as I pull the straps
around our disappearances
the leather tears
 it seems
we carry more each time

"dress light" she said
and picked the thinnest shirt
the rest we carry,
our baggage full of absence,
prepared for anything
as long as it doesn't happen
just yet

"On the 29th of May, 3 o'clock p.m., we sailed along a canal up to London. There we were held over for eight days because the ships' crews were all on strike."

The empty strike-bound
ships loll in the small tide
that reaches upriver.
Edward had diptheria
for three weeks in Libau,
now this delay. There will
be time for the smell
of disinfectant to leave us.
The kids invent games;
You be the soldier, I'm
the nurse. That tourniquet
is tied wrong. Don't
you want to get better.

In Kansas they preached
union but never struck
and I joined
a Bible study group
instead. Now, in London,
the pastor we travel with
avoids us, our pale unruly
kids, the smell,
and when I see the drunk sailors
shuffle in the grey streets
I compare lovers,
monies, with theirs
to find what is not mine.

The strike may go on
indefinitely.
All afternoon my wife
and I watch the waves
unravel patterns in the river

and the kids
make up
their gods.

Passage 1912

"Most of the family became seasick, especially my wife."

Monotonous waves fall down
 on the ship and it creaks.
Vomit in the halls,
 on the afterdeck, in his beard.
Holding on to the rail
 as he braids his dinner down
 the ship's side
 knowing he said
 for stability, motion
 convincing them all.

And they huddle under shawls,
 inert on the canvas chairs,
 trying to keep their feet
 off the running floors.
They watch the up and down
 of the ship falling under waves
 and when a deckhand comes by
 saying the best way to beat it
 is to keep moving
 they can't stand up.

Canada

1912-1961

"There is a long history in each of us that comes as not only a reawakening but a repossession when confronted by the world."

William Carlos Williams

Disembarkation: Quebec

Usually,
most of the formalities
are accomplished before
we disembark, the various
officious men checking papers,
laughing with each other
at the women in the stages
of preparation, not knowing
anyone could understand or
maybe they did know.
It went as usual.

Well, customs.
They have tired faces.
On deck the babble
of voices suddenly unfamiliar.
Clumsy and uneven
with luggage
we trundle down
the incline like disease
and they
will be the first to catch it.

"27. No immigrant shall be permitted to land in Canada who is afflicted with a loathsome disease or with a disease which is contagious or infectious and which may become dangerous to the public health or widely disseminated, whether such immigrant intends to settle in Canada or only pass through Canada to settle in some other country ..."

"Landed at Quebec then took train and arrived in Winnipeg on the 15th of June. There we stayed for five weeks, then moved on to Saskatchewan, to Cymric, a small post office and station in a grain growing district."

I lie awake,
watching the kids
edge into sleep,
unpredictable lumps
under blankets.
For me, the seats
are always too small.
Once an old lady fell
on me, the train
tipping her out
of the aisle on her way
to the bathroom.
Apologizing, she asked
where we were from
and I told her.
She said she was going
to Alberta but first
she had to go
to the can.
Crossing the country
this way you
grow wary.

"While in Winnipeg I worked 2 weeks on oil-tanks at \$1.00 per hour."

At Winnipeg we stay
with friends.
They say to find work
here, in the city,
but I have bad memories

on the sewer
chopping ice three feet deep
for 17¢ an hour
my first time here

we go on
into Saskatchewan
the sky as wide
as home

"This move I have regretted ever since, felt I should have stayed in the city, as some senior friends advised me."

even the widest terms
bear definition

we live with relatives
for the first year
and it's as if nothing changes

and I remember
what I liked least
about trains
was meeting other trains
and not knowing
who's moving

Trepidation

shake the
bones and tongue
do you
lacked words
the immediate
and new
words
community
writes into
the bone

improprieties
of old speech
you lived
a life
without
quotation
as tense
as the first person
and the
continual
shiver
between the million
locations
of what is

"My brother-in-law and I farmed jointly with horses and machinery.
After one year we separated for problems came up between the women."

The cats, chickens
farmyard paraphrenalia,
scatter at her approach,
though she is familiar.

It must be Katie's week
to collect the eggs. The hens
belong to Gottfried but we
share. Possession

only recently has mattered.
She swings the empty
pail around her as if
the sky were her enemy.

Each morning they jostle
at the stove, apportion
pots, pans, space,
argue over the one

clean dishtowel. Sunny
side up, my eggs I mean.
Gottfried likes his
scrambled. Between

you and me, neither
one of them can cook.
Somehow we manage to get
fed. Gottfried thought

it wasn't a problem
that came up but something
else. He was wrong.
When I determine

which way Eva's going
I go the other and when
I see Katie swing the pail
like that I avoid getting

in her way too. I slip
just visible, through the barn.
It is necessary to call
some things one's own.

"In October we had the worst snowstorm we had experienced since coming to Canada. We never experienced such extreme weather."

the air is locked
into crystal
mirror, prism,
of cold

to remember
is a key
that never fits

"Now the First World War had been over for several years when we still had bad reports out of Russia."

alien

the precision
of belonging to
another world

the way the end
of any place
is fixed

the Dietz's
showing a German flag
in their window
when we heard
about the Makhnovschina,
the anarchist guerillas,
bayonetting the kids
hiding in the stooks
outside of Rastadt

they had to move

this when the war
was over

after the detachment
of RCMP at Strasbourg
had brought back our 22's

and in the election
of that year they said
the aliens might get the
vote back

it can be finished that easily

I went to a campaign
meeting in Duval
it was outside, the wind
whipping dust into our faces
exact as steel

"There were many rocks to pick. The boys also had to pick roots."

before seeding
 we pick rocks
 the horse, Pete,
 drags the stoneboat
 across summerfallow
 sliding in
 last years' furrows

glacial debris, sediment
 chips off bedrock, pre
 history
 we dump the stones
 in the bush

but what we save:

chert, flint
 obsidian, small heads
 that turn up
 every year

or stones
 grooved for the wet thongs
 tight around them

we find them without
 leather, handles, half
 in dirt

clean them
 set them on verandahs,
 windowsills, show
 them off as paperweights

having forgotten the promise of no history
 the land we are always moving to

"In the fall of the year a sad tragedy took place on a farm west of Duval. The Kuxhouse's second daughter took her life by hanging. The present pastor would not bury a suicide case so I was asked to perform the funeral service. At the home I chose Job chapter 14 and at the graveside Romans 6; 16-23. It was a very sad funeral and many attended. After the funeral I was told that certain ones were conspiring against me and had planned to lead me out of the cemetery, not allowing me to take the service."

Kuxhaus, Kuxhouse
 the memoir gives no motive
 for the change
 but the change. The 'e'
 hung on, anglicism,
 as if a name
 must be changed
 by the place it's in,
 as if residence gave definition.

As if someone said
 "here
 spell it like this
 it'll look better on the mortgage"
 and her dad said
 "Ja, ja"
 and she was the only one
 who had to go outside
 to watch the horizon
 tighten.

And now she dangles
 uselessly in the air
 the last 'e' this language
 won't pronounce

 modifying all that
 which goes before.

the sky clear and dry

on the knoll, bins
 centered in the gesturing crops

empty
 the threshing machine
 needs new rollers
 his own bins

need cleaning, preparation
for a harvest

and him doing this
hunting for a girl
whose absences
are finally
attended to

leaning through the bin door
without urgency
a lattice of light
through knotholes or
where the shiplap's warped
 matrices of sun
 and the musty air
 of the center

and when the eyes
make their slow adjustment
it is into body

the girl
hung just
off the floor

dead
center
of the field

and turning away
the sky is tailed with swallows
rattling up
from the muddled eaves

and he slams the door
and leans back on it
and the swallows
circle the bin
with noise

and inside
the body turns slightly
on the shifting air

before
when he had an idea
of himself as travelogue
following projections

dreams of getting rich
always in some other place

it would not have been his world
she died in
but in some other
he could get ready for

but the family asks him to speak
because no one else will
and he finds himself
without anticipations
but talking about the imperative
of failure

that is
the possibility
of before or after

"I speak after the manner of men
because of the infirmity of your flesh."

what he picked to read them
at the grave
huddled blacks and greys

the family resemblance

against the pallor
the words stand out

not
"for sin shall not have dominion
over you: for ye are not under
the law, but under grace."

two verses before

no, the people who have moved are clumsy,
without assurance, who've kept the intricate
distances of the world between their children
and attendance in this place

but now
tenants without deferral
in a place of wind and sun
drying the mound of dirt and the flowers

living in the manner of men

and the church was opposed to him saying
anything to pronouncing that last 'e'
at all and later that year

"....our church was dissolved.

Strife and discord were the order
of the day, until harmonious function
was impossible. Lying and stealing
took place, sin and wrong was supported.
My strong protesting of this brought
more contentions, yes, even actual
fighting, so that I and my family
withdrew from them."

and he began
these memoirs
stepping into
continuity

in the forms of memory
himself

"My wife also changed her thinking and way of life and when a husband and wife both agree to follow God's way life becomes doubly beautiful."

duplicity

the holding
still

is the plying
of our bodies
round the world

around the other
cradle of pelvis,
thigh, pillow
of bone

the deception
is to think dawn
falls into air

the world turning
warm and
inevitable to
the sun

or the way speech
gathers our body
around it

when really we fall
into the sun
and our bodies fold
in the blankets
of this bed

"This fall we received a letter from Russia..."

There was a letter from Holstein,
a few lines that shift the past
into impenetrable snow

"It reported that he was taken
by authorities from his home
by night but no one
knew where.
Later we had a letter from
my niece, Amalie Miller, saying
both my wife's brother and his wife
were taken away from their home."

another kulak Stalin resettled

the papers are full of Siberia
the words across the pages like
the trails fading into snow
and Kessler, bishop of Tirasopol,
came begging
160,000 Germans dead along the Volga
from starvation, he went home
with over 30,000 dollars

and we gave what we could
but wheat down to 21¢ a bushel
what was there to give
no sustenance here for our memories

we blame it on the government

I am fifty and there is no snow
this winter. The wind will blow
dirt into black drifts. There are
three boys at home who do not want
my debts, this old language, who see
their origins still waiting
in the future

the way I dream about the price
of wheat going up.

Devotional

In 1928 crops looked
promising when a hailstorm
in July wiped
out the east farm
completely. In the
spring -29- we again
put in a big acreage
but now a poor crop
was harvested,
from 8-12 bushels per acre.
The weather this spring
was very dry, bad
high winds for seven weeks
so that many farmers
lost their crops
by soil drifting.
The price of wheat
that fall was the
lowest one had
ever heard of.
Another year of
poor crops.
This fall our crop
came off earlier
than usual due to
drought and intense
heat. The crops
of 1934 were poor
once again so that
many people
had to call on
the government for relief.
The crops of 1935
were totally destroyed
by a hard frost.
In 1937 we had another
crop failure.
We started our spring
work on the 16th of April,
had several weeks
of dust storms.

In 1938 we had a
year of rusted crops.
Drought set in.
In 1939 crops were average.
The crops of 1940
brought forth heavy
Russian thistle. In
1941 we had a poor crop
5 to 8 bushels
per acre. Now it
was difficult to sell
grain for lack of
elevator space and
a quota system was
introduced. With
much damp weather
harvesting was difficult.
The 1943 crop was again
poor. Even days
and years do take on
change. His world
and promise never
fail.

"All farmers who harvested 11 bu. or less per acre were paid a bonus by the government this year."

jocular or
ignorant
use of L.
bonus, good
man

something extra
beyond the
final payment

beyond the
definition

as grace

unaccounted for
except in
Ottawa

"The boys got a penny for two gopher tails."

suslik/
steppe gopher

here it's the Richardson's ground squirrel

the boys snare them
drown them
drag them behind bikes
shoot them with 22's
let the dogs run them down
hang them on barbed wire

one with a chain of young
falling out of it

sell the tails

WolgaDeutsche
you see how it doesn't matter
what you call them
I remember seeing camels
and not knowing what they were

and I never cut a tail off one either

"This year we bought a Pontiac car for the sum of \$425."

Our first car
was a Pontiac
with an Indian
on the hood.
As we drove
it seemed as
if we chased
him, then almost
caught up
when we ran
into a Ford.

"In 1940-41 winter was mild, first snow came the 5th of November,
heavy enough to make for good sleigh riding."

a gauze world

to wake up under snowfall
and hoar frost
the sun flowering in the ice
on the window

and outside, the rattle
of leather and bells
Felix and Ed
hitching the horses up

they'll be back from town
before I finish this book

I trust them with more and more
and it is mornings like this
when the edges of the world
are bandaged and the horses
prance at their harness
that I love them most

Tonight they will run the horses
the cutter tossing through
the soft banks and the girls
under robes, laughing,
holding on for dear life

from the doorway
you can hear them
but the air is too crisp
to stand there for long

for long for longing
the words set up their own connection

I like to leave the decisions to them

tonight they let the horses
cool too fast

on days like today
I don't go outside

"In the fall of 1942 on the 24th of November we took our youngest son Felix and his wife and two children to the train to Nokomis to go to work in a Camp in B.C. for the winter to avoid being conscripted."

The war like the mountains
is blue and far away.
The train is restless
as the air. It does not
stop long in Nokomis.
We tell ourselves goodbye.
The children are secure
in the hands
of uniformed strangers.
The wind brings winter
in its broad sweep
down the Rockies eastern
edge. The train moves
into it, into the piling
up of its screaming
that comes back to us
like the thin whistle
of shells.

Elevator Space

"But now it was difficult to sell grain for lack of elevator room and a quota system came into effect."

almost trapezoidal, wedge-topped then
lightning rods

needles that stitch
the air to them

brown clapboard as back for

POOL

GOVAN

letters ten feet tall
the verticals that mark towns

the top windows broken
and the rough timbers hairy with dust
have settled so that nothing
meets square

but today the wagons, trucks, tractor-drawn
trailers line up, piled high
the quota open, cars spotted along
the siding by CP

3 bushels per acre, we empty
the bins

and drive the horses up the ramp
weighed full, weighed empty, the wheat
spills though the grate to where
the buckets pick it up, rub
up the long spine and out pipes
to the tall bins

geometry of sheds, stairs, pipes
one wheel to change the chutes, necessary
offices

we stand out of the dust
and talk Lakehead prices,
Crowsnest rates, permit books,
Russian purchases until the belt jams

and the buyer gone down in the boot
to scoop grain out, the hot plugged hole
that closes round your breath
no sky, just dust and walls
and the trap above the trouble
light dangles through

that perfect bulb of light

"We had a very enjoyable visit; all were well established farmers and businessmen. However, I took sick after several days and snow fell heavily so that we had to return home earlier than expected."

visiting the Schmidts, the Rufs,
Propps, Erharts, Engels,
I can't remember
all of them

and going home
with this most common infection

the body
harbors

touch
the skin
there is a lag

the response coming
across distance
the way someone answers
through flurries of snow

the symptoms are inconsistent
without the larger unease
and I never know
where I picked them up

my throat dry
my eyes running

hot with fever
but clammy with goose-flesh

delirious
lucid

to have this common
cold is to have
neighbors

anybody's
hands to hold
the Kleenex to my nose

"We had two more children added to our family by then."

the older ones, Amalie, Edward,
 married and gone; Sam
 working out; Gus sick;
 the rest, only
 they're not such kids anymore either,
 running across the linoleum
 with mud on their shoes

(it's funny how you remember this
 like snow sticking to the agents' boots)

never closing the door

Amalie had her second baby
 in the middle of harvest
 stooking until the day before
 she squatted on the kitchen floor
 "sort of like going to the bathroom"
 she says

I never look to find my features
 in them, replications
 of my nose, as if I was prime
 and all these later versions

some people say they look like me
 some people say like Katie

it depends on who says it

Amalie, my daughter
 without a bed
 or later, Alex, choking
 in the chaff and sheaves
 my heart inside him
 dead

down twist of the lips
 running in the family

I'm not looking forward
 to the kids' leaving home
 although they play in the mud
 digging canals, sailing bark ships
 when I tell them not to

my insistence that the present
make its necessary patterns in the past

Katie washing the kitchen floor

The Yard

The yard arranged for convenience;
 the barn and sheds close
 half of it, hedges square
 the other side. Yellow caragana;
 purple, white lilacs; so few trees
 to pick a shelter from.

Birds glide in
 from another yard. Ducks going
 over high to the few sloughs
 left this spring;
 the shortest routes
 the ones most travelled. The yard
 traps news
 like this from
 their passage.

One road down the windbreak
 towards town, another passing
 out behind the barn, past
 cattle pens,
 thin poplars nailed together.
 I note each entry and departure.

And sometimes the wind
 enters and departs like voices
 whooping over the horizon
 past the peeling barn
 and hedges, wandering on
 the summerfallow, spooking the horses.
 Voices. And I walk
 out there at night
 to listen, never sure
 machinery squatting in tall grass,
 uncut by the granaries,
 isn't moving,
 noting each particular
 as if I wouldn't
 come back the same.

But out there, stumbling
 over tilled ridges, through
 shoulder-high crop, is no
 articulation.

Only to the yard,
certain of each object there,
do the voices come, flocking
like birds to nest
in the branches
of your body's
memory.

"This is now the 28th of December, 1945 as I write this in my diary.
The weather turned very cold."

Digging out. There
must be drifts six
feet high between
the house and barn.
My shirt sticks across
my back and when
I rest it stiffens,
fabric of cold.

Last night, as the house
cracked with frost
I wrote in my memoir,
shovelling through
the colorless past.
I was perhaps too near
the fire. Sweating,
I straighten from
my desk and ice
hints down the spine.

"The weather this spring was very dry, had high winds for seven weeks so that many farmers lost their crops by soil drifting, some reseeded again but then only Russian thistle grew, so that there was no crop."

last fall
the weeds tumbled
across the fields
like refugees

they collect at the fences
but don't burn
and by then the ground
is full of their seeds anyway

it's as if the land
sprouts your memories
even though you planted wheat

"In the month of December the Pool Elevator (Govan) with 60,000 bushels of wheat was burnt down. The weather turned very cold down to 40 below."

the coldest nights
hold the fires
in them

watching shingles, boards
surge into
the rising air

(last winter
Sam and Mary losing
their house by fire
all the contents)

I shift against
the heat
your body holds

later

the aurora flare
across the sky

and ashes keep dropping
quiet as mercury
all over the yard

The Ostensive Method

"In the spring of 1945, April 27, Felix's second daughter was born,
named her Wilma Marlene."

you can make
no assumptions

I take her hand
trace letters
in the palm

and she thinks
I'm tickling

or, pointing
things out

der Stuhl
der Tisch
das Puppchen

the first definition
is to touch
with the finger

a problem
of repetition
and what is at hand

until Felix's wife
takes her

"don't dad
she hasn't
learned
them in
English yet"

later
she puts her doll
in my hands

and says over
and over again
all the
wrong words

"I was over seventy when we finally got the power in. My wife was in her sixties and could not see in the evenings, with only the coal-oil lamps."

The trucks sit all day in the drive,
sinking holes, and then we don't see
anyone for three weeks. Later
they do it in one push. Poles
dropped in, tamped down, current
stepped down in the yard, wire strung
from post to post to fuse box,
series or parallel the power
moves through.

And at night the house falls into abrupt
dark, not the slow fade of kerosene.
When your hand moves across the switch
an image lingers, retinal,
and for that moment I have you twice.
Once, the silent body that comes
across the room in unaccustomed dark

or again, in the eye's fashioning,
taut and definite as all the apparatus
of connection our house contains
adequate as electricity, the flow
of electrons to a pole.

"My life's experiences are written in this book, from my childhood to the end of my life...I was now 76 years old, my wife 72 years."

My name is Samuel Karst.
 My wife; Katherina Yauk.
 My sons; Alex, Constantine,
 Samuel, Edward, Gus, Felix,
 in that order.
 Alex and Constantine dead.
 My daughters; Amalie and Agatha.

it is the ellipsis
 the horizon's crack
 the poem slips through

I came to this country
 three times.
 I worked on the sewer,
 on the oil tanks,
 as a blacksmith,
 as a farmer.

the name, Karst,
 means stone
 the face as cut
 as runnelled
 as limestone

My name is Samuel Karst.
 There is nothing different
 about this country.

his grandchildren touch
 the cracked skin
 their fingers cool
 as water

I never thought it could go on
so long, this death drawing across
her perpetual skin, the breath rasping
in her throat like a knife on stone.
The room is dull, the patched blinds
drawn through the light. Outside,
in the tree by the window the sparrows
are a thousand pips of noise
and here, bird-like, her fingers
pluck the quilts under which
she lies indistinctly. Her eyes
have already that clarity
you expect from the dead
or the half-dead.

The boys
say it would be better
to happen quickly. Sometimes
I imagine that the boys are still
at home. I always notice the round
black eyes of the sparrows, how
there was no way to keep the light
out. But I was wrong. Felix showed
me how the eyes close, the way the skin
draws interminably together.

Outside
the birds
are suddenly gone.

In the middle
of this distance
I remember the ocean;
how the moon tipped
each wave like frost
and below me
the portholes glowed
like constellations,
I could pick ours.

Now, in the blank
winter I try to fill
with motions made
or unmade, my grandchildren
pull their sleighs
through drifts the
wind rearranges.
I have watched them
for three days now,
since the first heavy
snow, and they
too have patterns.

At night there is
no horizon, just a lower
dark where there are
no stars.

Canada

1961 - 1977

"The persistence of the dead in the
living, if recognized, makes us
sane."

Tom Marshall

"Now for the older men I can recall..."

Hanan, Kuxhaus, Reinhart,
Krentze, Peil, Laubnan,

he names them
in the diary
as later he wanted
to show me pictures

who had beards, greatcoats,
cylinder hats borrowed
for the picture he thinks
but can't be sure
the details slip away

like I did

unimpressed with pictures
pulled from their corners
in mildewed albums
the way names are pulled
from his solicitude

eleven years old
I couldn't sit still
long enough

anxious
for the world

The Difference

five eleven, a hundred and eighty pounds,
brown hair, brown eyes,
five fingers on each hand
all the norms

or
the way memory takes everything
out of proportion
six-four, two hundred and twenty,
solid across the shoulders
and four fingers on his right hand

the pinky caught in the grain auger

Nominal Definition

rot

rouge

KpachLIN is

red

somehow the gulls fly everywhere
and the sky is blue

touch it
and it is never the sound of words

oh nomina

somehow the birds fall
from your mouth

or how the old man dies
a rose in his cheek

The Fence

the fence
was a series of pickets
each carved
into an arrowhead
with scrollwork

when he died
we moved it
posting it around
our yard

I used to climb
on it, trying
to find
the sky's edge

until I fell
catching myself
on one of the points

I still have
that scar

Willson

sitting in the house now
 with him in the next
 room, slow
 with pain and unremembrance

a phone call from the hospital
 in a town 30 miles away
 asking for next of kin
 when the nurse asked him
 he said "Nancy"
 and that stumped them
 for a minute
 because they knew Nancy
 so the nurse asked again and got our number

said
 "he's not hurt bad
 just shaky"

two days later
 I took the car over
 to Rose Valley to pick
 him up and all the way home
 he talked about buying cars and tractors
 joked about his plastered arm
 "I guess I'll be a one-armed man
 for a few days"
 and shook

I sit in the house
 and read the diary:

"In January 1934 on the
 15th our oldest daughter
 had her first son named him
 Willson Erwin. The following
 fall he took seriously sick
 with pneumonia."

Nancy rolled the car
 she wanted him to help her buy
 and he can't recall
 what happened except he
 didn't pay for it

"that's the
last time I have anything
to do with Indians"

on the couch
pain shuffles through him
like an old man

he's got the excuse
of what's happened to him before
sickness

that record starting
in the diary

failure
years
in North Battleford
his wife left him
not enough cock for me
and she took up with an Indian too
Nancy's almost as fat
as she was

This is real. History might
be extenuation
but sitting with
hair gone grey
a catalogue of small hurts

"Had the doctor
worried whether
he would recover
but God restored
him to his
parents again."

the diary meets him more than
halfway

Nancy's son-in-law broke
the windows out of Willson's
halfton but
that's another story
I was tempted to say but it's not
only knowing all this
falls short
of the glut of hurts
sprawled on the couch
in the next room.

Molly's Translation

Molly

(Amalie, the oldest daughter)

or mom

(my point of view, the youngest
son)

who remembers him

(Samuel Karst, my grandfather)

writing at night

(the memoir, the self as
narration)

later helped with the translation
of those memoirs

said a couple of them
drove into Kamishin

(Kamysyn on the present
maps)

to buy the wine
for the wedding
and on the way home
they "...sampled too heavy
and I (Samuel Karst now)
became drowsy and lame."

(not drowsy, not
lame, he got drunk
is what he said)

and the horses

found the road home

(Holstein isn't on the maps at all)

Dance

The skeletal dance you danced
bone without flesh
shivering in the crisp air
an old man
unspeaking
distant in the silence

He died gracelessly.
I remember little; thin skin
almost falling off him
big fingers groping over his violin
telling us to sing, to dance
the notes falling singly, useless.
Unable to speak the language,
he called me by names I
do not understand.

I have tried to remember
the dance, full,
but imagine only
skeletons in winter
stumbling over
isolate bones
under snow.

It is as if

it is as if
there is no difference
in the entries of his speech
into this country

no ground marked
that could not be marked
in another language

in the entries of a diary
of another place

he arrives
and it is as if
he never arrives

or is always
not quite getting there

there is no place in the memoir
you can point, say
look, this could only
be written here

it is as if
he wrote this
waiting for a place to happen

like an accident

it is as if
as if

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